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Antarctic landscape

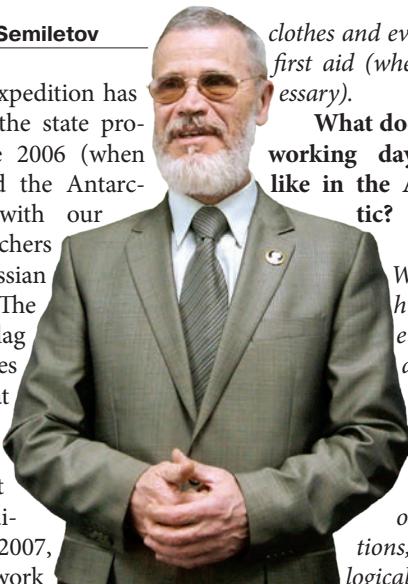
Polar explorers

On friendly terms with penguins

Thousands of scientific studies and hundreds of tests conducted on ice continent over just six months

By Alexander Semiletov

The fifth expedition has been part of the state programme since 2006 (when Belarus joined the Antarctic Treaty), with our polar researchers joining Russian colleagues. The Belarusian flag has many times been raised at foreign polar stations and we have sent various expeditions since 2007, since certain work can only be conducted in the field. In just six months, our scientists have conducted studies in all major spheres, obtaining truly unique results.



Alexey Gaidashov and engineering-technical works. We never stop during the day and remain busy in the evening. We keep communications and heating systems going and make sure that the diesel and electric generators work day and night. In the evenings, we process data and do our 'home work'. We're so tired that we don't even have the energy to read a book.

In a word, our schedule is tough. It's a true 'luxury' to lie in bed later in the morning — even in foul weather. We have just three months to complete all our tasks. Of course, exceptions do occur. On a fine Sunday we might slightly change our routine to take photos along the coast, surrounded by pretty penguins and seals.

Tell us about your team
A.G.: I was joined by Mikhail Korol, who heads the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences' B.I. Stepanov Institute of Physics, and Vladislav Myamin, who is an associate professor at the Microbiology Chair of the Belarusian State University's Biology Department. Besides our scientific studies, we serviced equipment and transport, cooked, washed

clothes and even gave first aid (where necessary).

What does your working day look like in the Antarctic?

A.G.: We work hard every day: 12-14 hours of scientific observations, ecological events

Space Station from above. During our years of work, we've made minor repairs and have insulated our 'home'. It has a small kitchen, a shower room (equipped with an 80 litre boiler) and a common room where we gather to chat, watch DVDs or listen to music. I hope Belarus will start building its own station in coming years.

mineral water with added multivitamins.

Are you allowed cigarettes or alcohol?

A.G.: Alcohol is strictly banned although there's nothing in writing. Of course, there are exceptions, such as New Year or February 23rd celebrations. We have a symbolic 50g shot. However, there are dozens of litres of spirit taken to the continent for

friends and relatives usually has an adverse effect, as I've long since noticed. It's easy to misunderstand the tone of a conversation, leading to upset with mothers, spouses or brothers. A 5-10 minute call once every 2-4 weeks is the best solution.

Do you miss your neighbour-penguins at home?
A.G.: We do. They are such fascinating and kindly

on looking closer, you see that pieces of ice let through rays of sun, appearing red or green. There are no white pieces: all are multi-coloured. In addition, glacial breezes are quite strong. If you leave a window open even a tiny crack in the evening, the interior is full of thick snow by morning, needing a great shovel to remove it.

Do you think that the hostile Antarctic is a suitable place for women?

A.G.: Women also take part in expeditions. At our Chilean stations, they work as serving staff and Russia does the same, although women can only join for short periods. They aren't given physical burdens. We do not dare, wishing to take care of our ladies.

Many people must yearn to join your expeditions ... so how do you choose?

A.G.: Many people do wish to go; it's true. However, each team member must be an expert in a specific area. We cannot accept a poet when we need a physicist. Neither can we substitute a meteorologist with an artist who might paint wonderful local landscapes. We work strictly within the frames of our scientific programme and only specialists are required.

As for smoking, everyone decides individually. I do insist on smokers using a tray for their ash and we don't discard the butts. It would be like spitting in a surgical department.

Can you call relatives or friends?

A.G.: For various reasons, we rarely make calls. Firstly, it's expensive. It's theoretically possible to call but it's not really great to move to a remote land and then spend your wages on phone calls. In addition, chatting with

What has most impressed or surprised you during the recent expedition?

A.G.: I was surprised to see that Antarctic snow is not white. It's transparent and,



Station among the ice

Do you need to take food and water to last six months?

A.G.: We travel in with machinery and food, with everything well calculated. You can't shop locally! We do have a fresh water lake close to our camp, which never freezes at the bottom. Its diameter is about 700m. We drill a hole to pump out fresh water (actually melted snow). Unlike our Belarusian water, there are no salts or minerals, so it's not as healthy. Accordingly, we take

biological research use.

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animals. I remember seeing a group resting some distance away while we were taking some ice measurements. After about ten minutes of ice drilling, we noticed that they had encircled us; they would definitely have helped us if they had been able to.

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